Jungle Without End

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Contents

The Silence That Remains.....1

Tunnel Rat.....14

Patrol.....28

North of Memory.....40

The Silence That Remains

1976. The war had ended on paper the year before. The last American units had lifted out of Vietnam in April of 1975, rotors beating the air above Saigon, statements issued, flags folded, records stamped and archived. Back home, the word Vietnam had already begun to change shape, softening into arguments, photographs, anniversaries. In the jungle, nothing had been told. The vines kept growing. The rain kept falling. The ground remembered everything.

Silence lay heavy beneath the canopy, not empty but layered, stacked with damp sounds waiting their turn. An abandoned map was rolled tight inside a length of bamboo, sealed with string that had gone dark with mold. It lay half-buried near the roots of a fig tree, the paper inside swollen and soft, grid lines barely visible through stains that had once been blood. A bayonet rested nearby, wedged into the earth at an angle, its metal flaking in thin rusted scales, each peel revealing an older red beneath. The air smelled of mildew, of wet cloth never dried, of old death that had long since stopped announcing itself. Somewhere far off, water splashed once, as if something heavy had stepped into a stream. Then there was nothing again.

The jungle held its breath.

Rain began without warning, a fine curtain slipping through leaves, tapping softly against helmets left behind, against the hollow ribs of burned huts now patched with new wood. The land was not abandoned. It was healing in its own way. New footpaths cut across old ones. Smoke rose from cook fires where nothing had burned a year before. Children's voices sometimes carried through the trees, thin and bright, then vanished. The jungle watched all of it with the same patience it had shown during the war.

He moved through it without disturbing that patience.

At first he was only a shift in shade, a ripple where there should have been none. Mud slid from his shoulders as he crawled forward, rain tracing lines through the camouflage smeared across his face. His hair hung black and heavy to his shoulders, bound loosely at the neck, slick with water. He wore combat trousers worn thin at the knees, boots patched and resoled more than once, and a sleeveless green shirt darkened by sweat and rain until it clung to him like a second skin. A scar cut down one side of his face, pale against the grime, pulling slightly at his mouth so that even at rest he looked as if he were baring his teeth.

The jungle recognized him before anything else did.

He stopped often, not because he was tired, but because stopping was part of the movement. His eyes swept the ground ahead, slow and exact. A thin wire stretched

between two roots made him pause. He knelt, lifted it with two fingers, followed it to a buried tin can packed with nails and old powder. He disarmed it without haste, reset it a few yards farther on, marked the position in his head. Another trap would go there later. Another line of defense. The war continued in these small adjustments.

Cole Harlan breathed through his nose, shallow, controlled. He did not speak aloud unless there was something to speak to. When he reached a fallen log overlooking a narrow path, he pressed his back to it and pulled a small notebook from his pocket. The pages were warped, edges furred with damp. He sketched the bend in the trail, the angle of the slope, the cluster of huts beyond the trees where new thatch gleamed wet and clean. He drew arrows where patrols might pass, circles where they could be cut off. There was no date at the top of the page. Dates had stopped mattering.

He touched the radio at his hip, fingers resting on the cracked casing. “Holding position,” he said quietly. His voice was rough but steady, shaped by long disuse rather than weakness. “Area shows movement. Possible enemy activity.” He waited, listening to the hiss of rain on leaves, to the soft creak of wood swelling with moisture. The radio did not answer. It never did. Still, he nodded once, as if receiving confirmation.

He shifted forward again, slipping down into a shallow depression where water pooled around his calves. He tested the depth with his knife, then eased himself under, leaving only the bamboo reed between his lips. From there he watched the path, eyes level with the mud, unblinking. Minutes passed. Then more. The rain thickened, then thinned. Somewhere close by, someone laughed, a brief sound cut short by distance. Cole did not react. He waited. He always waited.

The jungle closed around him, leaves brushing his shoulders as if in passing. It knew his shape, his weight, the way he belonged to the spaces between things. Long after the war had ended elsewhere, it still held him in its system of roots and shadows, moving as it moved, breathing when it breathed.

They had been stationed near Quảng Trị, along the coastal lowlands where the land sweated rot and metal and the jungles west of Highway 1 thickened into something close to myth. The platoon had run point for several missions along the Ho Chi Minh trail, disrupting supply convoys, clearing out dug-in positions that returned days later like fungus after rain. They slept in the bush, ate cold, packed rations curled on roots slick with mold. They were twelve in all — Bravo Three — and they stayed out longer than most, worked without radio for stretches, patrolled by compass and habit. The air up there never cooled. Even at night, the breath of the jungle stuck to their skin like oil.

Captain Drenner led them, a wiry man with a farmer’s neck and the eyes of a sleepwalker. He didn’t speak unless the map demanded it. Second in command was Fix, real name Ellison, who kept a notebook filled with crude cartoons and always claimed he would write a book. Next came Vargas, who cleaned his weapon with the same care men gave to wedding

rings. Then there was Klay, Ferrell, Beecher, Hatch, Washington, Miro, Sung, and the radio man, Dalton, who talked even in his sleep. Cole had joined them late, transferred in after a quiet disciplinary reassignment that no one mentioned again. Within weeks, he'd stopped being "the new guy." After that, they were just Bravo Three. No one else needed to know them.

It was in the jungle west of A Lưới, near a tributary of the Sêpôn River, that they were taken. Night op. Dense canopy. No air cover. The first mine took Ferrell's leg, shrapnel caught Hatch in the face. Then the jungle split open with automatic fire. Miro vanished in the dark — no one heard him fall. Claymore bursts lit up the trees. Fix tried to return fire and caught three rounds in the chest. Washington dragged Sung back behind a log only to have the log explode beneath them. Beecher screamed until the grenade silenced everything. Cole had covered Dalton with his own body, felt the radio crack and the ribs give under his weight. Captain Drenner's orders had been clear, but no one lived long enough to carry them out.

The entire thing was over in minutes. Afterwards, the Vietcong had melted back into the trees. Nothing remained except blood soaking into roots, dog tags caught on branches, and a flicker of heat rising from torn ground.

Now there was no sound but rain.

It fell with a hush at first, then heavier, swelling until each leaf slapped under its weight. Cole didn't move. He was lying flat beneath a broken frond, elbows sunk into mud, eyes fixed on a clearing where movement had been seen the day before. Water dripped into the curve of his neck, slid down his collarbone, vanished beneath the shirt. His M60 was wrapped in cloth against the damp. The pistol sat near his right thigh. The knife, always the knife, pressed against his chest, its worn grip wrapped tight with old green tape.

He didn't speak. Didn't twitch. The rain soaked everything, even the air.

He waited.

The heat was close to fever. It clung to the skin and crawled under clothes, steaming up from the soaked jungle floor and wrapping around the limbs like sickness. Cole lay in the underbrush just off the narrow jungle road, belly pressed to the wet soil, arms stretched out into the green tangle. The edge of a dead leaf clung to his cheek, unmoving. Mosquitoes worked his arms, his neck, the soft skin along his jaw, leaving welts that swelled and stung. A fly crawled into his left ear and buzzed. He did not flinch. Another landed in his mouth, walked along the teeth, then out again. His eyes didn't blink.

Rain slid through the leaves above him, pooling between his shoulder blades and dripping from the ends of his shoulder length hair. It mixed with sweat and dirt, ran down the grooves of old scars. His skin was stained in layers — mud, oil, dried blood, soot. He hadn't washed in weeks. He didn't smell like a man anymore. He smelled like the ground itself.

The village sat just beyond the bend — a cluster of houses with tin roofs and laundry lines strung low between poles. Smoke drifted up from a cooking fire. Somewhere a child laughed, shrill and brief. Cole didn't look toward it. His eyes were on the path.

They came slowly, talking low. Two men in olive uniforms with faded red bands around the sleeves. Vietcong. Not marching — just walking, rifles slung casually over their backs, one with a cigarette between his lips, the other scratching his stomach. They had that ease in their step. The kind that came after the last battle was over and remembered only out of habit. They spoke without looking around, not alert, not wary. The war was over. America was gone. What was left to fear?

Cole waited.

They passed within arm's reach, the reek of old canvas and sweat thick in the air. One was humming. The other spat sideways into the grass. Cole didn't move until both backs were turned, and even then he rose with the slowness of breath, his hands pressing silently into the loam, shoulders lifting without rustle. Rainwater streamed down his face, clinging to the black paint that streaked it like a mask.

His knife came out without sound — a wide combat blade, blackened, notched at the edge.

The one behind walked slightly off to the left of his partner. Cole stepped from the canopy as if peeled from the tree trunk, two strides behind him now, hand reaching forward in one motion, clamping the soldier's mouth shut tight. The man stiffened, tried to turn, but the blade was already driving under the ribs, then again, and again — quick, hard thrusts into the gut and chest, blood pumping hot onto Cole's forearm. The soldier twitched, kicked once, then dropped in a quiet slump, face down in the moss.

The second turned his head, frowning, slowing.

Cole moved without pause — four steps, arms around the man's neck, pulling him back hard. The man let out a choked cry, boots skidding, but the knife was already in, low and brutal, thrust straight into the heart. The breath stopped mid-throat. The body buckled.

He dragged both into the undergrowth with practiced effort, one by the straps, the other by the collar. Leaves brushed against their boots. Their weapons were taken, checked, then dropped. He didn't need them.

Within minutes, the path was empty again. Blood soaked into moss. Rain fell harder now. Cole was already gone, swallowed by the canopy, his footsteps lost in the breathing earth.

The jungle thickened as he moved deeper. Roots twisted above the soil like muscle, leaves the size of chest plates slapped against his arms and stuck to his damp skin. Insects whispered in every direction. Somewhere behind him, water dripped slow and steady from

a broken palm frond. Cole stopped in a clearing not wider than two armspans. Ferns curled in the corners. The air tasted of old bark and iron.

He gathered wood with quick movements, selecting only the driest twigs and bark curls tucked under the lee of mossy trunks. From a pouch on his belt he pulled a small flint stone and striker. He didn't rush. Sparks danced in the dark like dying stars, caught the bark, and a thin flame hissed into life. He crouched low, feeding it slowly, keeping the smoke tight and low, choking it with damp leaves so the column rose no higher than his knee.

He spotted the snake just beyond the edge of the fire — thick-bodied, bright green and yellow with a red streak behind the head. It slithered lazily toward a puddle. Cole lunged without hesitation, catching it just below the jaw with one hand, the other bringing the blade down in a sharp arc that severed the head clean. It twitched once. He bit into the body with his teeth, tearing the skin free, then slid a stick down its hollow body and placed it above the flame, balancing it between two stones.

He crouched beside the fire, face orange in the low light, and found a wide leaf curved like a bowl, filled from the day's rain. He lifted it carefully and drank in silence, the water running down his throat like something remembered from another life. The meat hissed above the flame, curling inward. When it stiffened and darkened, he ate — tearing off chunks, chewing slowly, not for taste but for fuel.

He wiped the grease from his hand into the dirt, reached for the radio at his side, and pressed the button.

"Bravo Three, reporting mission complete. Two hostiles eliminated near Phong Nha village. Area not secure. Continuing operation in grid square eleven-niner. Still active. Still fighting." He released the button and waited.

The static was the same as always. No crackle. No hiss. No voice.

He tucked the set back under his arm, crawled across the clearing to the hollow of a dead tree, and slipped inside. The wood was dry inside. He curled one arm beneath his head, knees to chest, the M60 cradled tight against his belly. Sleep came without asking.

Pain woke him.

Red ants. Dozens. Biting into his ankles, calves, up his thighs. Their jaws sunk deep and locked. He growled through clenched teeth and began picking them off one by one, some with fingers, others smashed into his skin. He crushed the last with the butt of his knife, then sat still, breathing hard. His legs were blotched, welted, burning.

He pushed himself out of the hollow. The jungle was grey now, the light thin and diffused. Misting rain fell. He rolled his shoulders once, checked the ammo belt on the M60, ran his thumb along the bolt, and moved.

Every step was measured. He crouched low, weaving between broad trunks, ducking under hanging vines, stepping only on root or stone where possible. The jungle was alive with noise — distant croaks, buzzing, faint rustling in leaves — but to Cole, every sound held weight. The enemy had used these paths before. They could again. He stopped often. Ears tilted. Breath held. One hand on the trigger grip.

Time stretched. Hours passed. He didn't count them. He moved. Listened. Waited. Watched.

Finally, he dropped to one knee, pulled out a folded map from his chest pocket — paper soft and worn thin. He traced a path with his finger. Đông Hà. The name was half-smudged, the ink faded. It had been a base once. Probably overgrown now. Maybe scavenged. Maybe not.

"Could be supplies," he muttered. "Could be waiting. Gotta stay ahead of them. Can't slow down."

He folded the map back, tucking it inside his shirt.

"Stay sharp," he thought. "They're out here. Always out here. They get careless. I don't."

Then he moved again, slow and low, the jungle parting just enough to let him through.

He moved like the jungle itself, slipping through its ribs with no sound but the wet squelch of soaked earth under his boots. Three days passed without mark — no sun, no sky, just rain. Heavy, drumming, relentless. It poured in sheets during the day, trickled all night, seeping into cloth and bone. Cole didn't speak. He chewed beetles with slow jaws, cracked the shell of a centipede with his back teeth and spat the legs. When he caught a snake, he didn't bother with fire. Peeled the skin, tore the meat, swallowed in strips. Sleep came in pieces — a half hour curled under a root, a stretch of motionless breathing beneath giant leaves that sagged under water weight. His clothes stayed wet. His skin cracked behind the knees and under his arms. He kept moving.

On the third day, just past dusk, the trees thinned. Through the dense canopy, he saw the flat square of dirt, the broken fence posts, the hunched carcass of a rusted radio tower. Đông Hà. Once a U.S. fire base. Now stripped bare, grown over, barely recognizable. But something still moved there.

He dropped to his belly and crawled the last hundred meters, pushing slow through the tall grass, mud grinding into his elbows. A military jeep sat near the edge of the outpost, tires half-sunk in the sludge. Three men — VC, armed — were lifting crates from the back. One wiped his nose, another barked a joke. They weren't in a hurry. The war was won. What was left was cleanup.

Cole edged forward. Fifty meters. Then thirty. Then ten.

The grass came to his chest now. Rain tapped across the blades. He could see the muscles in the men's forearms, the casual bend in their postures. One of them lit a cigarette and stuck

it between his lips without looking up. The bolt on the M60 clicked under Cole’s hand as he chambered a round.

“Keep it tight,” he thought. “Short bursts. Don't let it jam.”

At eight meters, he rose from the grass. Mud streaked his chest, water streamed down his face. His eyes were dry.

The M60 roared in three quick bursts — short, punishing, sharp. The man with the cigarette dropped first, chest opened by three rounds, the cigarette still glowing in the dirt. The second turned and grabbed for his AK, mouth open, but Cole’s next burst shattered his hip and spun him sideways into the side of the jeep. The third screamed something — panic in the lungs — and let off a wild blast from his AK, muzzle jerking up into the air, bullets carving tree bark and whipping past Cole’s shoulder.

Cole stepped left, adjusted, fired again. The rounds chewed through the man's leg at the thigh, cutting him off his feet mid-turn. He hit the ground and didn’t move. Blood soaked the mud in wide arcs.

Smoke hung low.

Cole lowered the barrel, steam rising from the muzzle. Three bodies. One twitched. He stepped forward, gun raised, boot pressing down on the nearest chest. No breath. He leaned in — the knife slipped once under the chin. No sound. The last flinch faded.

He walked to the crates. The mud slurped around his ankles. He knelt, ran the blade under the lid, pried it open. Soviet lettering on the side. Inside: grenades, oval-bodied, thick pins. Food packets underneath — wrapped in waxed paper, unfamiliar markings, but he could smell dried meat, salt biscuits, oil-soaked tins and saw a bottle of whiskey.

He stepped to the jeep, pulled a canvas bag from the back seat, and began loading it — grenades first, then food. He worked fast, eyes scanning the treeline every few seconds.

"Not a supply run. A transfer," he thought. "Moving gear to another outpost. Probably others nearby. Patrols. Eyes."

He walked the edge of the outpost once, checking the shadows of the old structures. Shells of bunkers, doorless concrete, weeds growing in the cracks. Nothing. No fuel. No radio. No maps. Just tracks in the mud where tires had come in from the north.

He slung the bag over one shoulder, adjusted the M60, and stared into the trees.

"Trail's not cold," he thought. "They're still moving. Still feeding each other."

He turned and stepped back into the jungle. The canopy closed behind him.

The jungle closed again and kept him. Days passed without edge or count. Cole moved only when he needed to, settling into pockets of ground where the foliage folded thick and low, where the rain could not give him away. He ate the food he had taken from the crates — salted meat, compressed rations — and from time to time he unscrewed the cap of a squat glass bottle wrapped in cloth. Jim Beam. The label was half gone, the paper swollen and peeling, but the smell cut through the rot like a memory with teeth. He drank straight from the bottle, slow at first, then longer pulls, the burn working its way down into his gut and spreading outward. The jungle leaned when he stood. Leaves bent where they should not. The ground breathed.

Night came early. Rain followed it in sheets, then softened into mist that crept low along the forest floor. Cole crouched beneath a stand of roots, the bottle loose in his hand, his teeth chattering without rhythm. His skin felt tight. Hot, then cold. He wiped his face with the back of his hand and smeared more dirt across it. The mist thickened, swallowing the trees ten meters out.

Someone stood there.

Ferrell was just ahead of him, boots planted in the mud, uniform torn at the thigh the way it had been that night. One side of him faded into the fog, edges thinning, but his face was clear. Younger than Cole remembered. Calm. Watching.

Cole straightened a little. "Three VC," he said, voice rough, the words tumbling over each other. "Near Đông Hà. Supplies intercepted. Grenades. Food. Area still active. Still moving."

Ferrell didn't answer. He tilted his head slightly, the way he used to when listening to orders, eyes steady, unblinking.

"I'm holding position," Cole went on. "Staying sharp. They're careless now. That's when they get dangerous."

The mist rolled thicker between them. Ferrell stepped back once, then again, his shape dissolving into the grey until there was nothing left but rain drifting through empty air.

Cole's knees gave out. He crawled under the roots of a fallen tree, curling in on himself, the bottle slipping from his hand into the mud. Rain soaked through his clothes, ran down his back, pooled under his chest. He shook until the shaking stopped. Sleep took him where he lay.

Morning came hard and bright. Heat pressed down early, the air already buzzing. Birds called from every direction, sharp and insistent, wings flicking through patches of sun. Cole woke on his side, mud dried stiff along his arms. His mouth tasted of metal and old smoke. He pushed himself upright and sat still until the world steadied.

He reached into his pack, tore open a packet of cookies, ate them one by one, crumbs sticking to his fingers. He lifted a broad leaf cupped with water and drank, slow, careful not to spill.

"Still alive," he thought. "Still here."

He wiped his knife clean on his trousers, checked the M60, and stood. The jungle shimmered in the heat, alive and waiting. He moved back into it without looking behind him.

The last cookie wrapper disappeared beneath a patch of loose earth, buried with the others in a shallow pit beside a moss-covered root. Cole pressed the dirt down with his boot, slow and methodical, then wiped his hands on his thighs and hoisted the pack over his shoulder. The straps bit into the skin, raw from days of damp friction, but he didn't adjust them. He reached into his shirt and unfolded the map, the creases now softened from use, a corner nearly torn. His finger traced down a smudged line until it landed on a village ten miles southeast — Tân Lâm. It had been a name marked once in a mission briefing, then forgotten.

He folded the map again, tucked it away, and moved.

The jungle pressed close around him, steaming in the heat. Trees rose like pillars, vines looped from one trunk to the next, some thick as cables, others dangling like veins. Bright birds flashed through the upper canopy, calling in harsh, sudden bursts. Underfoot the ground was soft, blanketed in old leaves and the half-digested remains of last season's death. Cole stepped over twisted roots and ducked under low branches, sweat running

down his back in rivulets. Insects swarmed the edges of his vision, buzzing near his ears. He kept the M60 cradled in his arms and moved without haste.

“Too quiet out here,” he thought. “Or too used to the quiet.”

Two hours later he broke from the trees and stood at the edge of the village.

It was little more than a cluster of wooden homes shaded by banana trees, with open fields beyond where women worked bent at the waist, pulling roots or tending low crops. Children sat in the dirt by a cooking pot, and a few old men crouched near the well, smoking thin cigarettes. As Cole stepped out from the treeline, every head turned. Tools were lowered. One child stood slowly behind the other. No one spoke. They stared like someone had walked out of the past.

He approached one of the old men near the well — face lined, eyes sharp under the brim of a cloth hat. Cole stopped a few steps away and spoke low.

“I’m with Bravo Three. U.S. platoon. Seen any VC in the area last few days?”

The old man blinked at him. Said something in Vietnamese — a few clipped words — then turned to the pot nearby and picked up a tin bowl. He scooped boiled rice into it and offered it out with both hands.

Cole stared at the bowl a moment, then crouched and took it. He ate slowly, using his fingers, the rice warm and sticky. The children didn’t move. Their eyes stayed fixed on him — not with fear, not quite — but with the silence of something out of place, something they weren’t taught to expect.

He said nothing more. When the bowl was empty, he set it down beside him and stood. The old man gave a nod, brief and neutral. Cole turned and walked back toward the trees.

He found the pond a mile past the village, down a slope where the jungle opened to a clearing littered with hanging moss and crooked stones. The water was still and brown-green near the edges, but darker toward the middle. He stepped out of his clothes, stripped them down piece by piece, laid them flat on a dry patch of stone. His body was cut with scars, new and old — some clean lines, others jagged. Mud coated his calves and elbows. He scooped handfuls from the shore and scrubbed himself first with that, dragging grit over skin until it burned. Then he stepped into the pond, the surface trembling around his legs, and sank low.

The water was cool deeper down. He went under, eyes closed, arms drifting. Silence pressed around his head. No birds. No gunfire. Just breath held in the lungs and the weight of water.

He surfaced, slicking his hair back, then waded out and began washing his clothes one piece at a time in the clearer water near the rocks. When they were scrubbed clean enough, he wrung them out and put them back on wet. The heat would dry them.

He walked for another hour through the jungle, each step squelching in the mulch. The forest steamed. Cicadas screamed from high in the canopy, unseen but relentless. Branches dipped low from the weight of the air, and spiders the size of coins sat still in webs stretched between trunks. Sunlight bled through the green in flickering shafts.

“Can't stay near villages,” he thought. “They watch. They listen. Word moves faster than sound out here. If they know I’m moving… they’ll know where.”

His shirt clung to his skin. The pack bounced lightly with each step. Ahead, the jungle thickened again. He kept the M60 ready and his eyes sharp. The trail was only half a trail now, and the world was narrowing.

The trees gave way without warning. There, behind a wall of tangled bamboo, stood the remains of a French colonial house — its silhouette rising ghostlike from the undergrowth, edges soft with vines and rot. Once white, the wooden boards had long since peeled to a tired gray. Shutters hung crooked, one barely clinging to its hinge, the others eaten through by weather and time. A thin iron balcony curled around the second floor, its railing rusted to flakes. Insects hummed around the eaves. A thick silence held the place, not hostile, but waiting.

Cole approached slow, M60 raised, barrel sweeping the doorway as he stepped up the crumbling porch. The door gave with a creak and pushed inward.

Inside, the air was dry. Not clean — layered with dust and the soft, dry smell of paper and mold — but still. Once, the house had been beautiful. The living room opened wide in front of him, wood floors dulled by years of grime but intact. A canapee sat in the center of the room, cushions crushed and eaten at the seams. The fabric had once been dark blue. Now it was closer to ash. Around it, two elegant armchairs stood angled toward a large mahogany table, carved legs twisted like rope, surface covered in a fine skin of dust.

He moved slowly, stepping around furniture, eyes cutting from shadow to shadow. No movement. No breath but his own.

Through the archway was a kitchen, tiled in blue-and-white patterns, some cracked, others still shining beneath the grime. Pots hung from rusted hooks. A white enamel stove stood near the wall, door open, black inside. He moved through to the staircase, boots echoing against the worn wood.

Upstairs he checked the rooms one by one — the master bedroom held a baldachin bed, its netting ripped and curled like spider silk. A chest of drawers stood near the window, mirror fogged with age. The next room had a child’s bed with carved edges, painted animals faded to smudges. Old French toys lay scattered on the floor — a wooden horse, a music box missing its crank, a doll with a missing arm. He swept the barrel of the M60 through the

corners, alert for signs of use, of life. Nothing. The house was empty. Deserted. But preserved by neglect, not destruction.

Back downstairs, he spotted a glass-front cabinet behind the dining table. He opened it and found six bottles inside, three of them half-empty and clouded with dust, one still sealed. The label was worn, but he could make it out: Delamain Très Vénérable Cognac, 1951. The glass felt cold in his hand. He cracked the seal, twisted the cork loose, and poured a thumb's worth into the cap.

It tasted deep — old wood and sun and something floral under it, smooth as silk and heavier than anything he'd had in years. He sank onto the couch, sinking into the dusty cushions without resistance. The rifle rested across his knees.

The drink warmed him from the chest outward. He poured again, this time more. His shoulders eased back. For a moment, he was just a man in an old house. Just a breath, not a weapon.

Then he saw it — the vinyl player, half-covered by a lace cloth browned at the corners. He reached down, uncovered it, and found a stack of old records still in place. He pulled one out at random and placed the needle.

A soft crackle. Then the voice.

Lucienne Boyer. *Parlez-moi d'amour.* The notes flowed out of the speaker slow and melting, delicate and faintly echoing through the long room. It had been decades since he'd heard that voice. French, warm and mournful, like it belonged to another world entirely.

He sat back and let the sound fill the room. The old furniture, the smells, the soft afternoon light slipping through broken shutters — all of it seemed to draw the years away. For the first time in a long while, he forgot the jungle outside. His grip loosened on the weapon. His body slackened. The room could have been 1931, the war a continent away, his own blood not yet spilled. He could almost feel the presence of ghosts — not haunting, just sitting nearby. Observing.

He took another drink. The music spun on.

His eyes drifted shut, the air humming around him, warm with drink and memory. For a while, time stopped.

The bottle lay half-drained on the mahogany table, its glass sweating in the warm still air. Cole sat hunched beside it, elbows on knees, head bowed, eyes lost in the dancing crackle of the needle as the song wound down into silence. Only the soft clicking of the turntable remained. Then that, too, stopped.

He stood slowly, the rifle swinging loose in one hand. His legs wobbled once. The warmth of the cognac had settled deep into his spine, making every step just slow enough to feel unfamiliar. The stairs creaked as he climbed. Halfway up, he paused and leaned against the wall, breathing through his nose, teeth clenched. Then he pushed forward again, into the hallway, back to the master bedroom.

He stepped wrong. The edge of his boot caught the side of a tall wardrobe, and his weight crashed against the door, splitting it down the middle. The hinges groaned. Wood snapped. The door fell inward with a heavy, cracking thud. Dust poured out like breath long held.

Inside, old clothes sagged on bent hangers — moth-eaten coats, a woman's dress browned with time, a child's faded jacket. He stared at them without thought for a moment, then turned toward the tall mirror leaning against the far wall.

The glass was cracked at the edge, silvering gone in places, the surface dim and warped like water. His reflection moved with a delay, then caught up. He leaned in.

His hair hung in ropes around his face, black and heavy. Skin pulled tight over the cheekbones, streaked with mud, sweat, blood, paint. Eyes sunken and rimmed with something not quite shadow. A scar ran from brow to cheek like a chisel line. He stared into his own eyes and found nothing he recognized.

"How old are you?" he muttered. "You look forty. Feel older."

He tilted his head, watching the mirror echo him.

“Who are you?” The voice was quieter this time. “Who the hell are you?”

The man in the glass didn’t answer. Didn’t blink. Cole’s hand came up fast and slapped himself hard across the face. His head jerked sideways with the force, then stilled. He staggered backward and dropped into the baldachin bed. The netting coiled around his shoulders. He didn’t push it away.

Sleep took him like a punch.

The morning came sharp and dry. Sunlight stabbed through the window slats and fell in long yellow stripes across the floor. He woke with a pounding skull and a bitter taste in his mouth. His shirt clung to him with sour sweat. The weight of the M60 wasn’t across his chest. That was the first mistake.

“Idiot,” he thought. “Drunk. Useless. What if they were watching?”

He sat up fast, scanned the room, grabbed the weapon from beside the bed, and held it close. He stayed like that for a minute, listening. No movement. No breathing but his own. Slowly he stood, boots hitting the floorboards with a dull thud, and stepped to the hallway. Down the stairs, rifle raised, trigger finger loose but ready.

The house was unchanged. The vinyl player was still. The bottle lay tipped on its side. No footprints in the dust but his.

He stood in the doorway, breathing hard.

Then he stepped outside. The light hit him full in the face. Steam was already rising from the forest floor. The jungle pulsed around him, thick and hot and green. He crossed the cracked porch, descended the steps, and vanished back into it.

He didn’t look back at the house.

“Enough. No more soft beds. No more music. No more mirrors,” he thought. “The enemy doesn’t sleep. I forgot that. I won’t again.”

The canopy swallowed him whole. The leaves closed behind.

Tunnel Rat

The ground gave a little under his boot — not soft like mud, but hollow, the kind of sag that meant air below. Cole stopped and dropped to one knee. The undergrowth here was thick, but the patch before him looked wrong: leaves arranged too neatly, a layer of soil not yet packed by time. He brushed it aside with slow fingers, revealing old wood beneath, grain warped with moisture. A hatch.

He drew his knife and pried it open. It groaned low, resisting, then gave. A breath of stale air rose up, thick with mold and old sweat, the kind of smell that never quite left tunnels like these. He stared into the black.

“Still here,” he thought. “Still waiting down there.”

He slung the M60 over his back, tight and high, drew his sidearm, and lowered himself in headfirst. The darkness swallowed him quick, the walls tight around his shoulders. He descended by feel until his boots touched packed earth below. There, on a rusted hook, hung a torch and box of matches — warped by damp, but still usable. He struck one, the flame sputtered, caught, and the tunnel bloomed in orange flickers.

He moved forward on hands and knees, pistol gripped in one fist, torch in the other. The light jumped over damp clay walls, over niches carved into the earth, over twisted root-veins overhead. Every ten feet he stopped, ears straining. Sweat poured from his neck down his back, the air pressing in with a weight that clung to his lungs.

Any moment. Any corner.

The tunnel sloped downward, carved steps appearing in the gloom. He moved slower now, feet angled outward, gun raised. At the bottom, the ceiling rose just enough for him to crouch-walk. The air grew heavier.

He passed the first room — an old sleeping area. Three wooden bunks, blankets rotted to thread. Air vents above, black with mold. A woven rice basket lay collapsed in the corner, crawling with ants. No sound. No breath. He moved on.

Second level. Deeper still. A storage chamber — shelves carved into the clay. Empty. The smell of oil lingered faintly. Nothing moved.

The third level opened wider. He stepped inside a larger chamber and swept the torch across its corners. Crates stacked shoulder-high. Russian markings. Cyrillic letters half faded. He opened one — landmines, circular, heavy. The kind that took off legs if they didn’t take more. Another crate held broken gear — boots, rusted rifles, tangled wire. Evidence of occupation, but no sign of the men who left it.

He cleared every room. Every hall. One step at a time. Muzzle first. Eyes fixed. Muscles tense.

“Too quiet,” he thought. “Too clean. Could be they just left. Could be they’re coming back.”

His heart ticked slow and heavy in his chest.

He climbed back through the tunnel’s spiral, boots sinking into the softened steps. At the top, he replaced the torch, slipped out the hatch, and sealed it behind him with fresh leaves

and soil. No need to warn them he'd been there. Better they walk in blind, if they came back.

He rolled his shoulders, unslung the M60, racked the bolt once, and moved forward through the jungle.

"Could be tonight," he thought. "Could be two days. But they'll return. They always do."

The canopy above stirred with wind. The underbrush trembled. The jungle breathed.

He kept moving.

The jungle light dimmed again toward afternoon, that strange hour when the sky grays though the sun still hangs, filtered through canopy and mist. Cole moved along a dry ridge cut into the slope, boots avoiding the trail where prints could be read. The jungle fell silent for a moment — no birds, no insects, just wind twisting the upper branches. He stopped and knelt, head tilted.

In the hush, he heard it. Not a sound, exactly, but the pressure of something wrong. He scanned the treeline. Nothing moved.

He kept going.

Three kilometers east of the tunnel entrance, he found the remains of an old American encampment — a clearing overgrown now with ferns and thorn vines. The bunkers had collapsed inward, the sandbags half-decayed, bones of rations poking from metal cans. He remembered this place. Briefly. It had been a refuel and drop site. Never held for long. Just a floating dot on the map once.

He paced it. Someone else had passed here not long ago — fresh footprints, deeper in the heel, toes pointed outward. Vietnamese boots. At least three men. Not farmers. Not children. Heavy load, by the print. Carrying gear.

"They used the tunnel," he thought. "Or they're headed to it."

He crouched in the shade of a splintered shelter and waited. Hours passed. A spider moved up his pant leg and stopped at his belt. He didn't swat it.

Then, from the west, the brush shifted — a branch moved too deliberately. Cole stayed frozen. Two men stepped into the clearing, both armed, one with a Chinese-made carbine, the other dragging something behind him — a mule or a bike, hard to tell. They walked easy, half-laughing, not checking the perimeter.

The third man emerged moments later, younger, cleaner. Radio on his back.

Cole moved before they saw him. He slid behind the husk of an ammo crate, belly low, the M60 raised. He could smell the grease on their guns. Their boots made heavy steps in the wet leaves.

He didn't shoot.

Not yet.

He waited, studied them. They dropped the pack they were carrying — rice, maybe. Something clanked like metal. The man with the radio turned in a circle, muttering into the mouthpiece. Cole's eyes narrowed. He could only hear fragments, but one word came clear: "Ngoc Hoi."

That was north. Closer to the old DMZ line. Another outpost? He couldn't be sure. The men began setting up a temporary fire. Casual. No sentry. No discipline.

He slid back the bolt with a faint metallic click, aimed low.

But something stopped him. A beat. A thought, like a hand on his wrist.

"They're not the same," he thought. "Not trained. Not wartime. Just men with guns. And I'm the ghost now."

He slipped away instead, crawling back through brush so dense it left scratches across his arms. He didn't shoot. He didn't speak. He vanished.

An hour later he was miles south, leaning over a black pool, refilling his canteen, face drawn in the water's mirror. He studied it for a long time, as though daring the reflection to flinch.

"Ngoc Hoi," he muttered. "You're next."

Then he stood and turned toward the mountains, the sun already behind him, and the jungle darkening by the minute.

He moved through the night without pause, guided by memory more than vision, taking narrow animal trails over wider paths, ducking under fallen trunks, his hands brushed with cold dew and spider silk. The sounds returned after dusk: owls calling in the high dark, frogs throbbing in water pockets, distant rustlings that might've been boar or men or wind. Each time he stopped and listened. Each time the silence followed him like a twin.

By dawn, Ngọc Hồi began to take shape in the folds of his mental map. The terrain rose toward ridges lined with scrub trees and broken stone. He hadn't been near here in years. During the war, it had been a crossing point, a tight corridor used by the NVA to funnel arms south — thick with mines then, thick with blood. He came upon the skeleton of an old convoy truck now split with rust, vines winding through its engine block like arteries. The cab was filled with dead leaves.

He rested in the shadow of it. Ate two biscuits from the pack. No water left. His canteen was dry and warm. He needed to resupply or find a rain catch. He wiped his mouth, checked the M60's feed belt, and moved on.

An hour later, he saw it: the edge of Ngọc Hồi's new footprint. Not a military base — not anymore. But something still moved here. He watched from above, lying flat in the underbrush, eyes scanning between banana trees and the half-built metal-roofed structures emerging along the trail. Trucks were parked. Civilian models. One of them had a new antenna, shiny, out of place. A new post, maybe — storage, checkpoint, trading post. There were men below. Some in uniforms. Others not.

He marked six rifles. One vehicle had crates stacked under tarp.

He counted three exits, all open to the jungle. He watched for a long time.

"No movement patrolwise," he thought. "Sloppy perimeter. No rotation. Not trained. But armed."

He slithered back into the brush and waited until the sun climbed high and the heat soaked into everything. Then he circled wide, taking nearly three hours to approach from the south. On the far edge of the outpost was a discarded trench, half-filled with rainwater. He slid in and crouched low, using the wall as cover, peering through vines at a storage hut not more than twenty meters ahead.

Inside, someone was talking. Not a soldier. Too calm.

Then another voice, louder, barking. Words that stung familiar. Not Vietnamese.

Russian.

He froze.

That changed the pattern. The tone. The direction of everything.

A Vietnamese militia outpost with Soviet advisors meant the war had not ended clean — not truly. It had just changed colors. He stared hard at the storage building. His hands tightened on the grip of the M60.

"Was never over," he thought. "Just dressed different. Kept moving. Same system. Same supply chain. Still breathing."

His jaw clenched. For a long time, he didn't move.

Then he began planning the strike. Not for glory. Not for revenge. Just to keep the truth burning. The pattern must not close.

"Tomorrow night," he thought. "I'll light the fuse."

He lay back against the trench wall and closed his eyes without sleep. Flies buzzed around his ears. The jungle waited.

He slept in fragments, head tilted against the trench wall, one hand still gripping the receiver of the M60. Dreams came disjointed, jagged — glimpses of Bravo Three crawling through wet darkness, Fix trying to light a cigarette with rain-slicked hands, Ferrell saying something he couldn't hear, mouthing it again and again through a curtain of smoke. Then silence. Then fire. Then nothing.

When Cole opened his eyes, the light had shifted. Late afternoon. The jungle had changed tone — softer, duller, the shadows longer and turning toward gold. He crawled up from the trench and circled back along the hill's rim, keeping his steps wide of the paths. A grove of bamboo arched over a stagnant stream, and he lay flat again, watching the compound from a new angle.

There were six buildings. One of them held fuel drums stacked beside crates. Another had a metal roof with a rusted chimney, probably kitchen or supply. Men moved between them slowly — not patrolling, just passing time. A card game under a canvas. A pair of boots slung over a wire. Relaxed, inattentive. No sentry towers. No spotlights.

He spotted the Russian again. Tall. Thin. Wearing boots that didn't belong in this heat. The man stood in the doorway of the office building, smoking and talking to two Vietnamese in olive uniforms. They looked deferential. He didn't.

Cole memorized the walk patterns. Entry points. Obstructions. Timing.

The sun sank lower. A bird screamed once from the canopy.

He moved back into the jungle to prepare.

He found a small hollow beneath a banyan root system and opened the cloth-wrapped bundle inside his pack — mines taken from the tunnel cache days before. Russian make. He inspected each, checking for rust, hairline cracks. They were crude but reliable. He armed two, set them aside. Took grenades next. Two F1s, pineapple-shaped, heavy. One smoke.

He loaded the M60, checked the belt, then tied two spare belts across his chest in an X. The pistol went in his waistband. Knife at his boot.

He didn't speak. Not even to the ghosts.

Darkness bled in slow, the sky leaking purple between the trees. Night birds took up their shifts. The air cooled, but not enough to lift the sweat already locked in his skin.

He waited.

By midnight, he had crawled to the edge of the fuel shed. No moon tonight. Just starlight and the low red glow of cigarettes in the distance. He lay still for minutes at a time, moving inches, then still again. Mud coated his arms, chest, face. The jungle had claimed him. Now it lent him back.

He slid the first mine beneath the stack of crates. A wire stretched across to the door. The second he placed near the rear of the office hut. Grenades he kept. The knife, he held already.

He listened.

A man whistled inside the office. The sound cut off with a grunt, and then the murmur of conversation.

He crept back five meters. Waited. Counted his breath.

Then he stood.

One short burst from the M60 shredded the tarp covering the card game. Shouts followed — chaos — a scramble of boots and chairs and blind shouting. He moved forward, slow, deliberate, firing another burst at the fuel drums.

The mine went off first — a dull thump, not fire, just earth and concussion. Screaming now. Figures darting through smoke. He threw a grenade into the supply hut and kept moving. The second mine cracked the night like a god's hammer — wood splinters, a man's leg spinning away into the dark.

The office caught fire.

He didn’t stop. He didn’t call out. He moved with purpose, not rage — one man inside a mission no one else remembered. The rifle bucked against his shoulder, shell casings spinning into the leaves.

By the time they fired back, he was already gone, swallowed into black trees.

Behind him, the compound burned. Men shouted in panic. Two of them shouted orders in Russian, the syllables broken with fear.

Cole didn’t look back. His boots moved silent through the brush. His face blank, breath steady.

“Was never over,” he thought again. “Not for me. Not ever.”

The jungle closed behind him like a mouth.

The fire's glow receded behind the trees until it was only a smear of orange against the low clouds, flickering through the gaps in the canopy like a memory refusing to die. Smoke

chased him, curling in thin gray ribbons between trunks, mingling with mist and leaf-rot. Cole moved fast, not in panic but with practiced withdrawal — the way he'd done it in '71, after demolishing a weapons dump north of the Hải Vân Pass. Same rhythm. Same body memory. Count the distance. Watch the path. Stop every third step. Listen.

Birds startled ahead of him, screaming into the black. Far off, he heard voices — angry, scared, searching. A name barked in Russian, then another in Vietnamese. None his.

By dawn, he'd circled fifteen kilometers south. He crossed a stream knee-deep and warm, then climbed a rise through broken limestone outcrops. The terrain changed here — higher, less dense. Trees thinner. More open light. He moved slower now, crouched between boulders, ribs aching under the weight of the M60 and the extra belts.

He found a pocket of overhang — stone canopy where rain had hollowed the rock — and ducked beneath it. Here he dropped to his knees and drank from his canteen, the water inside hot, metallic. His arms shook slightly as he poured the last mouthful down.

He hadn't eaten in almost two days. A few insects crawled past his boot. He snatched one, chewed, swallowed. No taste anymore. Just the act.

From his pouch he pulled the map, laid it out across the stone. The edge was torn from folding, the ink faded. His finger found the next spot — a village near the Laotian border, name half-smudged, something starting with K. Reports had once marked it as an infiltration point. Might still be. Might be nothing.

He stared at it a long time.

"What are they moving out here?" he thought. "What's worth the effort? Arms? Men? Orders?"

There was no mission briefing now. No chain of command. Only fragments of an old machine still grinding underground, and him crawling through the gears.

A breeze passed through the rocks. He smelled it — smoke still, but faint now. And under it, cooking fires. Wood and salt.

He stood and began moving again.

By late afternoon, he reached the edge of a clearing. A cluster of thatched roofs sat low to the earth, smoke rising from cookfires, chickens darting between logs. This village hadn't seen war in some time. There was no perimeter. No guards. Only routine — women washing clothes in a basin, an old man sharpening a blade, a dog asleep under a cart.

He didn't enter.

He watched from the treeline, still as a branch. His hair hung loose, black and damp, clinging to his face. Mud painted his arms. Leaves caught in his belt. A scar down his cheek now partly hidden by soot.

A child broke from the huts and ran toward the stream. Behind her came another. Then a third — a boy. He held something in his hands. A stick shaped like a rifle. He aimed it at a chicken and made shooting sounds with his mouth.

Cole blinked.

The boy fired again. The chicken squawked and fled. The children laughed.

He turned away.

Back into the jungle. Back to the heat and the trees and the wet silence. His boots moved through puddles without sound. No pause. No break. The map was folded tight in his pocket, next point marked.

Night would come soon. Then the hunt would begin again.

The jungle shifted around him as the light faded — that hour when the color bled from the world and everything turned gray, then blue, then black. Cole moved through it without noise, his breath steady, low to the earth. The trees thinned the higher he climbed, but the brush thickened, clawing at his legs, slowing his pace. The path was no longer marked, just faint impressions in the soil where old boots had once passed. Every few hundred yards he paused to listen — to birds falling silent, to the absence of wind, to anything wrong.

By nightfall, he reached a ridgeline overlooking the faint spark of lights in the valley below. The village he'd marked earlier on the map. The name was gone now — the sign burned off long ago, if there ever was one. A dozen huts. One larger structure with a tin roof, maybe a school or meeting house. No fences. No uniforms. Still, something in the way the place moved told him it was not untouched.

He lay in the tall grass at the ridge's edge, watching. No guards. No patrols. But armed men moved near the central building, their steps deliberate. One held a flashlight. Another dragged something — a crate, maybe two. A third came out smoking, AK slung over his shoulder.

Cole watched until the stars were thick overhead. He waited until the moon was behind cloud, then descended the ridge, slow and quiet, his feet finding soft ground between roots.

He stopped one hundred meters from the edge of the village, beneath a tree that had grown around the rusted corpse of an old motorbike. From his pack, he pulled the last two grenades. Checked the pins. Secured one to his belt. The other he kept in hand.

He crawled closer, using the tall grass for cover. The wind helped him — it moved the leaves, masked his breath. He was a shadow here, shaped like hunger and silence. Thirty meters. Twenty.

Then a movement — sudden — not from the village, but behind.

He froze.

A voice, soft, unsure. Vietnamese. A boy's voice.

Cole turned his head slightly. Through the leaves, not ten feet back, a boy stood watching him. Maybe ten years old. Barefoot. Holding a fishing net, empty. His eyes locked on Cole's crouched form.

They stayed like that for a long moment.

The boy didn't run. He didn't shout. He just watched. The way an animal watches something it doesn't recognize, but knows is dangerous.

Cole didn't move.

Then the boy backed away slowly, the net still in hand. He turned. Disappeared into the dark.

Cole exhaled. Still crouched. Still holding the grenade.

"Could've screamed," he thought. "Didn't."

He waited five more minutes. No alarm. No lights changed in the village. No shots. No rush of boots. The boy had gone, but left silence behind him.

He moved again, this time not toward the buildings, but around them. Circled east. Found the trail they had used to haul crates. Footprints. Drag marks. A wheelbarrow. He followed it fifty meters up a side path to a low dugout bunker built half into the hill. Corrugated metal for a roof. Doors made of planks. Locked with rope, not chain.

He cut it.

Inside: weapons. Old Soviet rifles. A stack of RPGs. Crates labeled in Cyrillic again. Two sealed ammo boxes. In the corner, sacks of rice.

This wasn't a village storehouse. This was supply.

He crouched, struck a match, and wedged it into a small paper fold beneath one of the crates. The flame licked once, then caught.

He was back in the tree line before the fire showed.

Then the blast.

It rocked the hillside — one sharp crack, then a wave of sound that slapped the trees and rolled the valley. Lights in the village flared. Shouts rose. A woman screamed. Then a gunshot — wild, aimless.

Cole was already gone, slipping back into the ridge's high grass, his form lost in the wind and the echo of fire.

He didn’t look back.

“Still moving,” he thought. “Still cutting the lines.”

The jungle ahead opened to him like it remembered his name.

By dawn, the jungle was thick with smoke and ash settling in thin layers on the leaves. The light filtered through gray, and the birds were late to start — even the forest held its breath after the fire. Cole moved in a wide arc east of the valley, the echo of the explosion still pulsing behind his ribs, though the sound was long gone. He didn’t feel victory. He didn’t feel anything. Only the weight of continuation. The next step. The next scan of the trees.

He hadn’t slept. He hadn't needed to. Something in his blood ran sharp, alive, like it used to on second patrols past midnight in Quảng Tín, when the moon turned everything silver and the ground felt like skin.

Around midday, the terrain changed again — more open spaces, less undergrowth. Bamboo stands and rocky outcrops gave way to flatter soil, low brush, and the skeletal remains of fence posts. A plantation once, or maybe a farming zone. There were no buildings left, just empty rings in the dirt where huts had stood and rotted away. He moved carefully, scanning for mines. Old habits.

A sound.

He dropped low.

Movement up ahead. Two figures — slow, methodical — sweeping the area with sticks. Not soldiers. Not even militia. Locals. Farmers, maybe scavengers. One had a hoe. The other carried a half-collapsed basket. They weren’t looking for him. They weren’t expecting anything.

He crouched in the brush, watching them walk among the ghosts of buildings. They didn’t speak. Just moved like they knew what kind of dead lay buried in soil like this. The wind turned slightly and carried their scent — sweat, rice, old smoke.

He turned away and kept moving. Past them, deeper into the jungle. Their world wasn’t his. Not anymore.

Hours later he came across a stream twisting through a defile cut into stone. He followed it until he found a spot where the water pooled — green, still, covered in bright yellow blossoms from the trees above. He stripped his shirt off and knelt, cupping water into his mouth. Then he splashed his face, his arms, wiping away the salt crust and blood streaks he hadn't noticed. A leech clung to his ankle. He burned it off with the butt of a spent cartridge.

He sat on a flat rock and let the water drip from his hair. He hadn't stopped in days. Not really. But the blast last night, the fire, the silence that followed — it had pressed something loose in him.

From the side pouch of his pack, he pulled the torn map again. The ink had smeared from the rain. Some markings were gone, others bled together. But the marks he'd made were still visible. Circles. Routes. Crosses. All drawn by his hand.

He stared at them.

Then he unfolded another sheet — a smaller one, older. His own scrawl again. Names. Coordinates. Last mission logs. All written for no one. He took a piece of charcoal from his pouch and wrote another line beneath the last:

Village supply site burned. Three targets confirmed. Next movement: northeast trail system toward Kon Tum. Continue disruption. No stand down. — Harlan, Bravo Three.

He folded it back up, tucked it inside the waterproof lining.

"Still fighting," he thought. "Still reporting."

The sun dropped lower. The light turned orange through the trees. Somewhere far off, a gunshot cracked. Faint. Not aimed at him. Not yet.

He stood. Slung the rifle.

And kept walking.

Ahead, the trees grew darker. The trail narrowed. The war waited.

The air cooled as he climbed, elevation bringing the first hints of mountain shadow. The jungle changed again, denser in parts, open in others where the wind had snapped trees in some long-past storm. The smell of burning still clung to the cloth of his pack. His boots left shallow prints in the damp earth, erased quickly by falling leaves and crawling insects. The only trail he followed now was the one he laid himself, an invisible line of motion strung across terrain he no longer needed to recognize — he had become part of it.

By nightfall, the canopy overhead thinned enough to show stars. A few brighter ones shimmered through smoke remnants drifting high above the valley. Cole kept moving. He hadn't eaten since the last stream. Hunger tapped at him lightly, but not enough to matter.

He would eat later. There would be snakes, maybe eggs in a nest, maybe nothing. He didn't think of food as comfort anymore. Just as fuel.

He came across the remnants of another path — worn stone beneath vines, maybe an old French logging road. The moss was thick on its edges. Trees had begun reclaiming it. Still, he followed it for a while, the terrain easier underfoot. The road climbed into hills, and soon the trees shifted again, thinner now, clustered in tight knots with long drooping leaves. The sky darkened.

Then he saw it: a faint light up ahead. Orange, flickering. Not a fire. A lantern. Hanging low, swaying. He dropped to a crouch and watched it.

A man emerged from behind a tree and crossed toward a small shelter built from split bamboo and salvaged corrugated metal. He moved slowly, unarmed. An old man. Another figure appeared — a woman, younger, carrying something bundled in cloth. They spoke in low voices, too distant to make out. Then the lantern was lifted inside. The glow softened.

Cole moved closer, step by step, until he could see the outline of the shelter clearly. A cooking fire burned low out front. A pot steamed. The smell of boiled greens and fish reached him.

No patrol. No soldiers. No uniforms.

He stayed hidden for twenty minutes. Then thirty.

Still nothing.

He eased backward through the brush, turned into the darker path, and disappeared into the jungle again.

A mile on, he stopped to rest near a rock face streaked with mineral stains, where a narrow trickle of water ran down into a shallow pool. He drank. Washed the sweat from his face. Then lay flat on a patch of cool earth.

He didn't sleep. Just lay there.

In the dark, the sounds returned — crickets, frogs, wind in the high branches. A voice echoed, but only in memory.

"Contact. Two clicks south. Line 'em up, Cole. Watch the right."

He closed his eyes.

"Dalton. Fix. Ferrell. Ngọc Hồi's cleared. More camps out there. More shipments. Just keep moving."

He rolled onto his side, one hand resting on the M60's cooling barrel, and stared into the dark.

"Next strike. Kon Tum trail. Infiltrate. Cut the arm."

The jungle did not answer. It only breathed. A slow, endless breath that never stopped.

Patrol

At first light, he was already walking again. The ground had grown uneven, studded with stone fragments and broken roots, the underbrush thick enough to catch at his knees. The trees above were taller now, thinner in the trunk but clawing high into a sky that burned pale blue and cloudless. He walked along the ridge trail for hours, legs stiff from sleep without sleep, senses dull at the edges but still moving in the pattern. Foot placement. Listening. Scan left, scan right, eyes catching motion without looking for it.

By midmorning, he reached a high bluff, the wind stronger here, lifting his hair from his shoulders. From this height he could see far — the jungle in all directions, the spines of green hills collapsing into gray distance. Somewhere beyond that haze was Kon Tum. He had circled it once in '69, flown over it twice in recon, and passed it in the dark without ever seeing it clearly. Now it rose again, not as a city, not as a goal, but as a zone of movement — another node where trails converged, where trucks might run at night, where messages passed hand to hand between men who spoke only in low voices and never trusted each other.

He watched from the bluff for a long time.

Then he began his descent.

The trail curved southward and passed an old shell of a village — no roofs, just outlines of foundations and the stone skeleton of a well. One side of the well had collapsed, stones scattered across the path. Inside it, a tree had begun to grow, leaves reaching upward like green hands from a wound. Cole stepped around it, careful. The wind caught a piece of torn cloth hanging from a nearby tree. Red once. Now faded to the color of dried blood. He didn't stop.

By afternoon, he reached the base of the slope where the jungle thickened again. The air grew heavy, sweet with rot and flowering vines. He moved slowly now, not because he was tired but because the landscape called for it — every leaf, every branch, every patch of still water might speak. The jungle here had teeth. The kind he recognized.

He stopped near a fallen log, knelt, and laid his rifle down beside him. From his belt pouch he pulled a strip of dried meat, tore it with his teeth, chewed without interest. His eyes never left the tree line.

A sound came — soft, deliberate.

Footsteps.

He slid flat behind the log, hand on the pistol.

A figure passed between the trees ahead — slim, short, carrying a rifle awkwardly. A boy, maybe seventeen. Barefoot. Uniform pieces mismatched, one sleeve torn. He moved like he didn't know how to. Like someone had handed him the rifle and said walk that way.

Behind him, two more. One older, sweating hard, a pack on his back. Another trailing behind, carrying a gas can.

Cole stayed still. The three moved past without speaking. No formation. No cover discipline. Just boys with guns, walking through a war they hadn't earned, serving someone else's cause. Replacements.

He waited until their sounds faded.

Then he rose.

He followed their tracks for two kilometers, boots silent, rifle loose in his hands. Not to kill them — not yet. To see where they went. If they led him to a cache, a station, a node.

At last they reached it — a flat clearing where four tents stood beneath a green tarp strung between poles. Two trucks, their hoods up, batteries exposed. Another man, older, talking into a radio with long pauses between words.

Cole backed away before they saw him. He marked the trees. The angle of the sun. The exit paths. Counted heads.

Then he vanished into the trees again, already mapping the strike. Already arranging the fire.

He spent the night in a hollow beneath a banyan tree whose roots twisted into the shape of a cage. The floor was soft with leaves and damp with the day's humidity, but dry enough to sleep without sinking. He didn't light a fire. He didn't eat. He lay flat, eyes open in the dark, listening to the faint hum of insects and the slow clicking of something small moving just outside the rootline. His breath was shallow. His thoughts narrowed around the new site — the four tents, the trucks, the men. One radio. One can of fuel. One perimeter not built for war.

He rose before the stars faded.

The morning came sharp, colorless at first, dew shining across leaves like sweat on stone. He walked without sound, the M60 strapped tight, packs adjusted so they wouldn't rattle. The brush ahead thinned slightly where the trail curved toward the clearing. He stopped well short. From there, he could hear water boiling. Men shifting inside canvas. A cough. A grunt. One man humming something low and tuneless, like he wasn't sure whether to hum or speak.

Cole crouched and studied the approach.

Two guards this time. New. Alert, but not smart. One smoked. The other fiddled with a broken strap on his rifle.

He waited.

Thirty minutes passed.

Then one of the guards walked toward the trees to piss. The other turned, facing the tents, tapping ash from his cigarette with the barrel of his gun. Cole rose, crossed the trail in four steps, and was behind him before the man had finished exhaling. His hand clamped over the mouth. The knife went in hard and fast, twice into the spine, once into the kidney. The body dropped with a soft thump into the brush.

The second man never returned.

Cole moved along the edge of the camp like a shadow changing shape. A flap opened — a man stepped out, shirtless, rubbing his eyes. Cole caught him in the throat with the butt of his rifle and pulled him down before he could cry out. The man flailed once, kicked, then stopped.

The third man heard something. Called out.

Cole stepped into the open now — the moment had to break clean or not at all. He raised the M60 and stitched a short burst across the front of the largest tent. Screams. The fabric ripped open. A man scrambled out, dragging a pistol from his belt. Cole cut him down before he could aim. Another tried to run, his foot tangled in the rope line — he fell into the mud and didn't get up.

A shout from the truck — a rifle cracked wildly, hitting nothing. Cole dropped to one knee, sighted, fired three short bursts. The truck door swung open, a figure spilled out sideways, hit the ground and rolled.

Then silence.

Smoke curled up from one of the tents, smoldering from a broken lantern. The rice pot had overturned, water hissing in the coals.

Cole waited five full minutes before stepping into the camp.

The radio lay shattered near the tent post. He kicked it once, checked the dial. Broken. A voice crackled faintly through the static — one word, unclear. Then gone. He left it.

He opened the first truck's door — more crates. Ammunition, rations, Soviet markings again. He opened the second: fuel canisters, medical supplies, a roll of outdated maps.

He moved quickly, pulling the grenades from his pack, rigging them beneath the engine blocks with a strip of canvas tied to the pins. Then he stepped back and pulled.

Both trucks exploded in sharp, uneven bursts. Metal flew, heat pushed outward in a hard gust, and the tarp caught fire. The tents began to burn, slow at first, then with hungry speed. The air filled with smoke and screams of flame devouring canvas and rope.

Cole walked away before the fire spread to the trees. His hands were black with powder. His face blank. The rifle slung again.

He didn't run. He never ran.

By the time the fire was a memory, he was already miles north, slipping through brush, heading toward another mark. No trail. No orders. Only fire behind him, and the long breath of the jungle calling him forward.

The jungle opened just enough to reveal a patch of earth scattered with old gear — torn canvas, broken straps, a rusted helmet lying face-up like a bowl forgotten in the rain. Cole slowed. The air held a different weight here, thicker, heavier, touched with the smell of metal and mildew. He crouched low and brushed aside the leaves. A body lay half-sunken in the earth, camo uniform long faded to gray, the ribs tight against the fabric like the man had been shrinking into the soil for years.

The name tag was gone. No boots. But the belt was intact, and strapped to it were three belts of M60 rounds, dry and clean inside their nylon wrap.

Cole unhooked them, fed one into his own weapon, rolled the others tight and slid them into his pack.

Then he noticed the second body. Just beyond the first, slumped against the base of a split tree trunk, face turned away, mouth open, dirt caught in the teeth. The man still wore a cracked radio set across his back, antenna bent, the earpiece snapped loose.

Cole stepped over the roots and crouched beside him. He turned the knob slowly, static humming to life.

White noise at first. Then fragments. Voices.

"…Echo Four, negative movement… continuing sweep…"

"…copy, baseplate… reposition on hill three…"

He pressed the transmit switch. "Bravo Three, reporting. Engaged enemy near Kon Tum trail junction. Request sitrep. Confirm contact. Over."

Nothing.

Static held a breath, then broke.

From the speaker, a song began. Faint. Warped from the frequency, but unmistakable. Jefferson Airplane — *White Rabbit.*

The chords stretched and bent through the jungle heat, electric and fragile. Grace Slick's voice poured from the old speaker like ghost-water, folding the air in strange colors. He didn't move.

He reached into the dead soldier's pocket, felt inside, pulled out a pack of crumpled cigarettes and a single cigar wrapped in foil. There was a zippo tucked beside them, engraved with the name *Carlo*. He flicked it open, struck flame, lit the cigar and drew in slow. The smoke rolled down into his chest and sat there like a weight.

He looked at the dead man's face, dry and sunken, the jaw crooked from time or impact.

"You see?" he said. "They're still out here."

He exhaled smoke sideways, sweat running from his hairline, curling down the edge of his jaw.

"You didn't die for nothing. None of us did. I'll find them. Every last one."

A pause. The song grew louder — "Feed your head…"

"I'll finish what they won't. This isn't over. Not for me. Not for you."

He tapped ash into the dirt and stared into the jungle. Crickets screamed in the canopy above, shrill and rhythmic. Birds echoed somewhere deeper, sharp calls that cut through the smoke and static.

Sweat dripped from his nose.

He looked at the radio again, tried the frequency once more.

"Bravo Three. Still active."

Only the song replied. He closed his eyes and listened. The music flickered, haunted, spinning through trees that no longer remembered what year it was.

He slid the cigar between his teeth and began patting the soldier's other pockets, fingers moving with quiet familiarity — not looting, not scavenging, just checking. Just like they used to do after firefights, when the medevac hadn't come, when there was no one left to carry stretchers. He found a crumpled foil packet tucked deep inside the man's front pocket, sealed tight with tape. He unwrapped it slowly. Inside, a small waxed paper bundle, folded tight, dust clinging to the creases.

Heroin.

Probably bought from some back-channel in Saigon or passed hand to hand downriver, traded for whiskey or dry boots. Half the platoons used something. To sleep, to forget, to make it through jungle nights when things moved outside the wire. He sniffed the bundle. Still potent. Still usable.

He slid it into his pouch without a word.

"Not for dreams," he muttered. "For the pain. If it gets bad."

He stood slowly, knees stiff, body sore from the past weeks of crawling, stalking, sleeping under roots, drinking puddle water. The M60 hung heavy from his shoulder now, fully loaded again. He glanced once more at the soldier, then turned and disappeared back into the trees, the radio still muttering fragments of broken transmissions and half-buried songs behind him.

The jungle ahead was older. The trees twisted in shapes like limbs, their trunks wrapped in vines thick as cable. Moss clung to everything. Insects buzzed in sheets. The air felt alive and full of heat that never let go. Cole moved through it without haste, every step calculated. He paused near a bend where the trail forked, scanned the branches above — signs of movement, broken leaves, the smell of cooked starch.

Somebody had passed through here.

He knelt, brushing fingers over the dirt. Tracks. Not fresh, but recent. Tread patterns. Vietnamese boots. Maybe militia. Maybe something worse.

He followed the trail eastward, up toward a ridge where he could gain vantage. It took him the rest of the afternoon, moving in bursts, hiding, watching. A fire burned low at the top, a narrow column of smoke barely visible unless you looked from the right angle. He crept up along the slope, crawling over stone and root, slow as the hours.

At the ridge, he saw them.

A small squad, no more than five. Not regular NVA — these were lean, ragged, maybe remnants, maybe old fighters turned opportunists. Their rifles were clean. Their faces hollow. They sat around the fire, talking in short, clipped tones, cleaning weapons, cooking rice in a battered tin pot. One man was digging in his foot with a knife, pulling out something, probably a thorn.

Cole watched from behind a thicket, invisible.

He marked each face. Each weapon.

He would wait for night. Then he would cut through them like he had at Ngọc Hồi and Kon Tum trail. No banners. No orders. Just the pattern, still burning.

The enemy didn't wear uniforms anymore. The war didn't wave flags. It wore faces. Faces like these. And he would remember each one before it dropped into the leaves.

The stars came late, and the moon rose hidden behind thick smoke-colored clouds. The fire at the ridge burned lower, and the voices quieted. One of the men curled against a tree, rifle laid across his chest. Another leaned over the rice pot, eating slow, blinking like he hadn't slept in days. The others stretched out under ponchos or sat hunched in the brush, eyes closed but ears open.

Cole didn't move. He had waited longer in worse places. The leeches crawled up his thigh under the fabric of his pants, and the ants found the sweat pooled at the back of his neck,

but he made no sound. The M60 was heavy across his arms, its barrel cool now, but ready. He watched for the moment when sleep overtook discipline.

It came an hour before dawn.

One man stood up, staggered off to piss, scratching himself with the barrel of his rifle. Another rolled over and pulled his poncho tight. The guard at the far end leaned into his weapon and let his head fall. Cole moved.

He slid low through the leaves, keeping to the dark spaces between trees, always circling, always listening. He approached from the opposite side, from where the fire's light was weakest, where the shadows spilled longest into the jungle.

He stopped behind a fallen tree and removed the safety.

A breath. Two. He counted three short bursts. That's all it would take if the rhythm was clean.

He rose.

The first burst ripped through the one crouched by the pot. His body buckled, kicked the tin aside. Rice scattered. The others were already shouting, reaching for weapons. One fired blindly into the dark, bullets slashing the trees. Cole dropped again, changed angle, came up at the left edge and fired once more — two men dropped before they could even cry out.

The last man tried to run.

Cole let him. Ten feet. Then fifteen.

Then he stepped into his path.

The man froze, chest heaving, rifle dangling by the strap. Young. Maybe seventeen. Mud on his face. No shoes. No insignia.

He raised his hands.

"Xin đừng," the boy whispered.

Cole stood still. The jungle waited with him. The boy looked into his eyes and took a step back. His leg hit a root, and he stumbled, fell.

Cole didn't fire.

He turned away, walked past the fallen, walked past the shattered fire and the cooling blood and the pot of rice still steaming. He moved toward the edge of the ridge, crouched near a tree, and sat down.

He lit the dead soldier's cigar. The one he'd pocketed. It had dried some, cracked at the edges, but it still lit. The smoke curled in the dark like a signal to ghosts.

The boy behind him sobbed once, quiet, small. Then silence.

Cole didn't look back.

He stared down the ridge toward the valley that lay beyond — mist curling like breath across the trees, the wind stirring the canopy, the earth endless and green and broken in all directions.

He smoked, sweat dripping from his nose, eyes wide in the night.

"This war isn't done," he whispered. "Not for me. Not while they're still breathing."

The jungle said nothing. But it opened before him like it always did. Willing. Familiar. Ready to hide him again.

The trees broke open to a clearing where the jungle met a narrow strip of cracked road, the kind laid decades ago and forgotten, half-swallowed by vines and dirt. Cole moved along its edge, feet never touching the asphalt, eyes scanning the ditches and brush for wires, for signs of tread, for the shift of leaves that didn't match the wind.

Ahead, a thin trail veered from the road, weaving through bamboo and tall grass. He followed it.

A hut appeared — slanted wood, rusted tin roofing, two windows without glass. Smoke curled from a clay chimney. Chickens scratched the dirt near the entrance. From inside came the sound of chopping and a strange, humming tune, slow and tuneless.

He approached carefully, rifle held but not raised.

A woman stepped from the doorway, barefoot, small, face lined from the sun but her eyes sharp. She held a curved knife in one hand and wiped it clean with her apron.

"You American?" she asked in rough English.

Cole nodded once.

She looked at him, from his mud-caked boots to the sweat-soaked shirt hanging off his shoulders.

"You look like a ghost," she said. "Ghosts don't carry machine guns."

"Sometimes they do," he replied.

She gave a small grunt, neither approval nor warning, and turned back into the hut. "Come," she said. "You scare my chickens. Come sit."

Inside, the air was thick with the smell of dried herbs and cooked roots. A bundle of hanging plants swayed near the ceiling, tied with red thread. A jar of something floating in brown liquid sat on the shelf beside a candle and a rusted compass.

He sat on the floor near the doorway. His rifle stayed across his lap.

“You eat?” she asked.

“Later,” he said. “You see any soldiers here? Viet Cong?”

She lit another candle, her hands slow and practiced. “War is finished, but war men still walk. Not soldiers anymore. Just men who don’t stop walking.”

He said nothing.

She reached into a wooden box and pulled out a handful of dried leaves wrapped in cloth. She poured hot water into a cup, dropped the bundle in, and handed it to him.

“Make you sleep good,” she said. “Not like dream. Like forgetting.”

He took the cup, sniffed. It smelled like bark and bitter roots.

“You drink first,” he said.

She laughed softly and drank from her own cup. “If I wanted you dead, you already fall.”

He drank. The warmth spread slow, then deep. His limbs sagged. The rifle across his lap grew heavier. His thoughts folded in on themselves, like paper wilting in rain.

When he woke, the hut was dim. A breeze moved through the door. Crickets sang outside.

The woman sat near the wall, watching him with one leg tucked under her.

“You sleep four hours,” she said. “No scream. You strong ghost.”

He sat up. “I need to know troop movements. Any supply runs. Trucks. Camps.”

She shrugged. “North trail. Men move at night. Not many. But I see three trucks last week. Soldiers with new guns. Not old ones like here.” She tapped the floor. “They go west.”

Cole reached into his pouch and pulled out the small waxed packet. He unwrapped it and placed it on the floor between them.

“You want?” he asked.

She stared at it for a long time.

Then, “Long time since that taste.”

He handed her the gear. She prepared it with a burnt spoon, using a match to heat the residue, then drew the amber liquid into a syringe. She passed it to him first.

He nodded. Took it. Used it.

She did the same.

They sat in silence for a long while, the fire casting low light, the chickens asleep just outside, the jungle pressing close around the walls of the hut.

“I had a son once,” she said finally. “He went to the war. Never came back. But I hear him walking in the trees.”

Cole said nothing.

She rose and brought a bowl of rice and salted pork, set it before him. He ate slowly. The food was soft, warm, real.

When he finished, he stood.

“You go now?” she asked.

“Still work to do.”

She nodded. “Don’t forget how to stop walking.”

He stepped out into the dark, the jungle waiting in every direction. The sky was black. The war still breathing.

The forest swallowed him whole before the moon cleared the clouds. He moved without torchlight, without a trail, guided only by instinct and the echo of the woman's words trailing behind him like smoke. Don’t forget how to stop walking. But he didn’t know how. Not anymore.

The medicine still pulled at the edge of his blood, softening the jungle’s sharp corners. Trees seemed farther apart, sounds slower, but his body knew the path even if his mind swam. Each branch brushed his shoulders like a hand he couldn’t quite feel. He walked for hours, heading west, the way she had pointed — toward movement, toward noise.

Just before dawn, he found a ridge and climbed it on all fours, fingers digging into loose stone and vine. From the top, he saw the faintest glint of metal in the trees far below — a convoy, maybe three or four trucks, parked tight and low to the ground under camouflage netting. No campfire, no smoke. But too many tires for a simple pass-through.

He crouched and watched until the sun rose.

Six men moved among the vehicles. Their movements were precise, efficient — not locals. Two had Soviet rifles slung across their backs. Another wore a cap with a foreign insignia.

They were loading crates into the back of the last truck. Heavy. Deliberate. Arms. Supplies. Black market or state-run — didn't matter. They were part of the machine that never stopped grinding.

Cole marked the angles, counted men, studied the terrain. His fingers found the edge of the map inside his pocket, but he didn't take it out. He already knew where he'd be by nightfall.

He retreated from the ridge and found cover beneath an outcrop of lichen-covered stone, where the sun didn't reach and the moss grew thick. There he cleaned the barrel of his M60, changed the belt, adjusted the sling so it wouldn't catch when he moved. He ate a strip of dried snake, chewed it like leather, and drank rainwater from a curled leaf.

All afternoon he rested, eyes half-lidded, body conserving what it needed. He spoke to no one. Not even the dead.

When night came, he painted his face again with mud and ash, tied palm leaves around his boots to muffle the sound, and began his descent.

The jungle grew louder as he moved — frogs, birds, distant movement. The trucks were still there. Lights off. Engines quiet. The men sat around a lantern dimmed to a red flicker. One stood to yawn. Another smoked, cupping his hand around the ember. The crates remained in the truck bed, ropes looped over them.

Cole watched from the brush twenty feet away, breathing slow, blood calm.

The wind shifted.

He rose from the earth like a ghost summoned by roots, the jungle behind him closing like a mouth.

The first burst took two of them before the others knew they were dying.

The second man turned, fired into nothing, bullets shattering glass, tearing into the dark. Cole moved fast, side to side, bursts short and mean. One man screamed and ducked under the truck. The one with the cap ran and caught a round in the back — dropped forward, silent.

Cole advanced.

A grenade rolled under the truck and burst in a blossom of fire and earth, flipping the vehicle onto its side. The remaining crates inside clattered out, splitting open. Rifles, wrapped in oiled cloth, spilled into the mud. The truck caught fire. The heat lifted and curled the leaves of the trees overhead.

By the end, there were no more shots.

Just the fire and the sound of something inside the jungle exhaling.

He walked among the bodies, checking for breath, finding none. He kicked a boot. Still. Another stirred faintly. He stepped closer. The man looked up, gasped.

“Who—who are you?”

Cole looked down at him, face streaked with soot, mouth dry.

“Nobody,” he said.

Then silence.

He doused the fire with dirt, pushed the crates into a gully, and covered them with leaves. The sky was black above, starlight faint. He hoisted the rifle again and disappeared into the jungle’s throat, leaving behind nothing but scorched rubber, scattered brass, and blood soaking into the roots.

North of Memory

The jungle thickened into silence as he passed the last of the fig trees and bamboo clusters. Ahead, half-buried in the green and ancient earth, the structure emerged—stone blocks mottled with lichen, their seams crumbling but holding still, heavy with time. Root systems wrapped the walls like petrified veins, strangling the upper ledges, reaching deep into cracks as though trying to pull the whole place back into the soil.

Cole stopped at the edge of the clearing, studying it.

The temple sat crooked in the earth, some long-forgotten construction from the Champa or older still—before war, before language he could place. Three statues flanked the entrance, each carved from stone darkened with moss. One wore the calm, distant expression of a bodhisattva, hands open to the sky. Another, sharp-faced and grinning, leaned forward as if whispering. The third was broken at the shoulders, its face smashed off, its base wrapped in the roots of a strangler fig that had burst from beneath the temple floor and coiled up into the air.

He moved slowly past them and ducked into the low archway. Inside, the air changed. Cooler, dense. The smell was of damp stone and old ash. He found a staircase descending into the dark, steps narrow and slick. He took them carefully, one hand on the wall, his boots brushing centuries of dust loose from the edges.

At the base, the stone corridor opened into a wide chamber. Pillars stood at each corner, carved in bas relief with figures in poses of dance and war—some smiling, some contorted, others with multiple arms holding objects he could not name. A fire pit sat in the center, long unused.

He climbed back out before nightfall, gathering wood from the jungle's edge, breaking off what was dry and dragging a bundle back to the chamber. He passed the statues again, pausing. One of them now seemed to look in a different direction, though he couldn't say how. The grinning one. Its mouth seemed wider. Its eyes more open.

He didn't dwell. Just lit the fire.

The flames crackled low, casting long shadows across the old carvings. He unstrapped the M60 and began to clean it slowly, cloth moving through the feed tray, fingers clearing carbon from the bolt. His mind wandered only enough to remember the rhythm. His hands had done this more times than he could count.

Then he rose, left the warmth, and slipped back into the green to hunt.

The snake was long and patterned with rings—a tree snake, quick and strong, but it didn't sense him. He caught it near the base of a tree, pinned its head, snapped its neck with a twist. Back at the temple, he skinned it with his knife, tore the guts clean, ran a sharpened stick through the meat, and began to cook it over the fire.

He drank from a massive stone bowl that sat beside the wall, filled by rainwater. Its rim was etched with lines he couldn't read. The water was cold and clean. He drank until his belly felt heavy.

Night fell hard in the chamber.

He sat with the fire at his feet, chewing snake meat, eyes on the dark recesses of the stone hall.

Then he suddenly heard steps—light, slow, deliberate—somewhere beyond the fire's reach. The kind that aren't made by someone trying to be quiet. The kind made by something that doesn't care if it's heard.

He froze, the half-eaten snake slipping from his fingers.

He stood, M60 rising, the barrel pointed toward the arch in the far stone wall.

Then—eyes. Two pale slivers like bone set in pitch. They blinked once, slowly, then vanished.

"Who is there?" he barked.

Silence.

He stepped forward, the fire at his back stretching his shadow ahead like a spear. Nothing moved. Then, near the far pillar, something hunched low, human-shaped, crouched.

Then it wasn't.

Gone.

He backed slowly to the fire. His skin crawled. Every hair along his arms and neck stood on end.

He didn't sit. Just stared into the black beyond the flame. Sweat rolled down his temple, but it wasn't from heat. He thought of stories. Talk from other platoons. Strange things heard in the trees. Faces that didn't belong. Men who walked into fog and never came back. He had dismissed them once. But now, with the fire crackling in a temple built before memory, with cold eyes flickering out of nothing…

He kept his gun in his hands.

He didn't sleep.

Not that night. Not in that place. The jungle outside had always watched. But this place—this stone chamber—something else watched too. And it remembered.

The jungle was no longer just trees and undergrowth. It had changed in his mind. It leaned closer now, too alive, too aware. Cole moved with his back hunched and the M60 always raised, his boots sinking deeper into the mulch with every step. He stopped every ten meters, crouched low, listening. His ears rang not from sound but the absence of it. No birds now. No frogs. Only the quiet sound of his own breath and the faint slither of sweat down his ribs.

Something was watching him.

Not Vietcong. Not militia. Something else.

He turned sharply. Nothing behind him. Yet the pressure stayed on the back of his neck, like a hot palm pressed just beneath the skin. His finger curled tighter on the trigger. The hairs on his arms rose without reason.

“Just move,” he whispered to himself. “Keep the line. Keep north.”

He took another step. The trees seemed to close.

Then he began to run.

His body moved on panic. Legs wide, arms pumping, sweat flying from his hair as he crashed through vines and roots and low branches. The weight of the rifle bounced against his shoulder. His boots slipped on wet earth. Branches whipped his face. His breath came ragged, broken, his chest burning.

He tripped over a knot of root and went down hard, skidding sideways into a pile of leaves, shoulder striking stone. He didn’t get up. Just crawled, dragging himself forward until he found the hollow of a dead tree, wide enough to slide into. He backed into it, pressed his back against the wood, drew his knees tight to his chest, and held the rifle across his lap like a child clutching a toy.

Then the tears came.

They slid down his cheeks without noise, mixing with dirt and sweat. His chest shook, but no sound came out. His mouth opened once, but he bit down hard on his lip until the taste of iron filled his throat.

Flies swarmed into his ears. He shook his head, swatted at them weakly. Ants crawled up his arms and neck. Mosquitoes landed and feasted in silence. His skin was a feast and the jungle knew it.

He pressed his forehead into his knees.

“What is this…?” he thought. “What the fuck is this…?”

The silence stretched long.

Then a whisper of leaves above. A movement in the canopy. Something light. Fast.

He jerked upright, eyes wide, and scrambled from the hollow. His hands fumbled with the rifle, heart pounding like a fist against bone.

He spun and looked up.

Leaves moved. A blur—too fast.

He screamed.

The barrel of the M60 rose and roared. The burst cut upward in a thunderous arc, chewing leaves, snapping branches, kicking bark from trunks. He fired until the belt spit out empty casings into the mud, until smoke hung in the air like breath.

Then silence again.

He stood there, panting, body trembling, sweat running like water from every inch of skin.

“Not real,” he muttered. “It’s not real. I’m not—I’m not—”

But something had been there.

His hands reloaded the belt with mechanical habit. His eyes scanned the canopy. Nothing moved. No bird flew. No sound came back to him but the echo of his own scream.

Still shaking, he stepped forward.

“One more mile,” he said aloud. “Just one more. Then I find them.”

But something else moved with him now.

Always just behind. Just out of reach.

Night slid down over the canopy like a wet cloth. The air thickened until it felt like breathing through gauze. Cole moved through it with hollow steps, the jungle shifting around him in slow pulses — trees stretching when he turned, roots where there had been none before. The heat pulsed behind his eyes, a throb that wouldn’t break. Nothing made sense anymore. He tried to think in straight lines, but every thought twisted midway through. Where was north? Where had he come from? He wasn’t sure how long he’d been walking. It could’ve been hours. It could’ve been three days.

He stopped, leaned against a tree, tried to calm the storm inside his chest. His hands were trembling again. Sweat pooled in the hollow of his spine, rolled down his ribs. His mouth was dry, but his lips tasted of salt and rot. When he closed his eyes, he saw not darkness but flickers of his platoon’s faces — Ferrell, Dalton, the back of someone’s helmet turning to mist.

He opened his eyes.

A sound.

Something moving above — a slow rustle, deliberate. Not a monkey. Not wind. Something crawling along branches too thick to sway, sliding with the weight of something thinking.

He raised the M60 and fired.

Short bursts, three, maybe four — loud, cracking through the green. Leaves exploded. Wood splintered. Then silence fell harder than before.

He stood there, heaving, fingers tightening and loosening around the grip of the gun. His ears rang. The jungle didn't move.

"Show yourself," he whispered, but his voice was dry and cracking. "Come on. Come down."

Nothing.

He slung the M60 back and drew his knife. The blade was still stained. He wiped it across his thigh, smearing filth with more filth, then crouched and dipped his fingers into the mud. With slow, practiced lines, he smeared streaks across his cheeks, forehead, arms — black lines, tribal and meaningless, just enough to make the face disappear.

He pressed his back against the tree. His breath shallow. The knife tight in his fist.

The jungle felt alive. Not with animals. Not with the usual hum of heat and insects and birdsong. But something else. Something just at the edge of sense, like a heat shimmer in his skull, crawling along his spine.

His mind reeled.

"There's no one out here," he thought. "This is your mind. It's the heat. It's just the heat. It's just—"

But something was out there. A whisper that wasn't wind. And now he waited for it to return.

The tree behind him throbbed with sap. Or heartbeats. Or both. His pulse matched it. He crouched lower, tighter, every muscle a spring.

A leaf snapped.

He didn't breathe.

He pressed his body to bark, paint flaking, ants crawling down his neck. The silence pressed on him like weight. His knees ached. His fingers tingled. He clenched the knife tighter.

All night he waited. Eyes wide. Watching.

And the rustling above never really stopped.

Morning arrived without light — just a thinning of the dark, a pale grey bleeding through the mist. Cole hadn't closed his eyes once. His legs trembled from the stillness, muscles pulsing in short spasms. His mind had sunk into something half-waking, half-dreaming, but his body refused sleep. Something in his gut, in the marrow of his bones, kept sounding the alarm. Every heartbeat a drum. Every breath a countdown.

He stood slowly from where he had crouched all night against the tree. Mud clung to his back like skin. His hands were numb from gripping the knife too long. The M60 felt heavier than usual as he pulled it back into his arms. He listened.

Birds shrieked in staccato bursts overhead — not normal birdsong, not the chatter he remembered from months ago. These were sharp cries, panicked or mocking. He couldn't tell.

He began to walk.

Every ten meters, he stopped. Turned. Watched.

The vines above his head twitched as if something pulled them. He spun around. Nothing.

The trees no longer looked familiar. Even the way the leaves curled seemed off, thicker, too slick. The air was wrong — too still one second, then gusts from nowhere, moving in directions wind shouldn't.

"This isn't the jungle I know," he thought. "This isn't the same place. It changed. Or I did."

He picked up pace.

He moved through the brush faster, pushing through hanging branches, thorns raking his arms, briars catching his sleeves and tearing them open. Sweat poured off him. His breath came louder than he liked. The M60 bounced against his side as he leapt over a fallen tree, hit the earth hard, and scrambled up again.

He kept looking over his shoulder.

"Someone's there. Someone is always just there. Just outside the eye. Same footsteps. Same pace. Like a shadow on my heels," he thought. "It's not Viet Cong. No boots. No voice. Just—watching."

He dropped into a shallow gully and crawled under hanging roots, brushing off centipedes and webs. His heart thudded like a drum wrapped in iron. He couldn't stop the thought looping in his skull:

“ Somewhere back there. That temple. That shadow. I saw something I shouldn’t. I don’t even know.”

He reached a clearing and stopped, chest heaving.

He lowered his head. Closed his eyes.

“God,” he muttered. “God… God the Father… who… hallowed be… in the valley of…”

The words collapsed in his mouth, fractured into nonsense. He paused. His lips dry.

“Fuck it.”

He kept walking. Faster.

The plants ahead moved with a wind he could not feel. Leaves curled inward as he passed. The roots grabbed at his boots. But he didn’t stop.

“I’ll shoot whatever it is. I’ll burn the trees down. I’ll carve it out of this place. I’ll get to the next ridge. Then the next after that. Just keep moving. Keep—”

Another bird screamed. The sound like a child in pain.

He broke into a run again, the M60 rattling across his chest, sweat flying from his hair. The jungle blurred around him — green and black and red in flashes.

Whatever was behind him wasn’t chasing.

It was just there.

Waiting.

The trees broke open without warning. One moment Cole was wading through shoulder-high ferns, thorns catching on his skin, the next he stepped into a clearing scorched by sunlight and silence. The air was dead here. No movement, no breeze. Just a dome of heat pressing down from above like the sky was a sealed lid.

He staggered into the center and dropped to his knees. His chest rose and fell in sharp, shallow jerks. Sweat poured off his face, soaked his shirt, ran in rivers down his arms. His eyes stung from salt. His lips cracked when he tried to breathe through his mouth.

He planted the M60 across his lap and looked up at the canopy.

“Come on, motherfucker,” he muttered through his teeth, voice hoarse, almost gone. “Here. You got nowhere to hide now. Come on. I’ll get you. I’ll fucking get you…”

He stayed there. For hours.

The sun didn't move fast enough. The shadows around the clearing never stretched right. He watched the trees, every inch of them, eyes flicking from branch to branch, waiting for a silhouette, a flicker of motion, a glint of teeth.

But nothing came.

And still, he knew. It was there.

"It's in the leaves. In the bark," he thought. "Watching. Always behind. Always just behind. I made it follow me."

He rubbed his face hard with both hands, dragging sweat and mud down across his cheeks. His fingers trembled.

"Jesus Christ, man. You haven't slept. You're chasing ghosts. Just heat and noise and dark. That's all this is. Just jungle tricks. Brain tricks. It's nothing."

But his voice didn't sound like his own anymore. It was smaller. It wavered in the air like it wasn't sure it wanted to be heard.

He looked down at his hands. They were shaking. His knuckles were white around the stock of the M60.

"Get some rest," he muttered. "That's all. Just rest. Ten minutes. Let the enemy come. Let him come. I'll hear him."

The sweat on his face cooled as he laid down in the grass, M60 across his chest, one hand still gripping the handle. The heat blurred the world around him. In seconds, the clearing melted into dream.

Six hours passed.

He woke with a gasp.

Darkness was creeping in. The edges of the trees were black, and the last light of the day fell in stripes across the grass like ribs.

He sat up fast, weapon ready, breath sharp again.

His back was soaked. His head pounded.

Nothing had moved. But everything felt wrong.

"I shouldn't have stayed here," he thought. "This place… this clearing, it's too open. They watched me sleep. I know it. They saw every minute of it. Maybe they touched me. Maybe they're waiting until I close my eyes again."

He rose to his feet, eyes scanning every inch of the treeline, finger ready on the trigger.

“This isn’t my jungle anymore. It changed. Or I did. Or both.”

The night was coming fast now, and he didn’t want to meet it here.

He took one last look at the canopy, felt something shift behind the black leaves.

And then he walked, faster than before, never turning his back for long.

The night swallowed him again. Cole moved through it half-blind, legs shaking, breath rasping in his throat. He stumbled over roots and stones, went down hard, palms tearing open, then pushed himself back up without pause. He didn’t swear. Didn’t slow. His body moved because stopping felt worse than falling. The jungle seemed steeper now, the ground uneven in ways it hadn’t been before, as if the earth itself shifted when he wasn’t looking.

He walked until his calves burned and his lungs felt flayed. He walked until the dark thinned and a pale seam of morning slid between the leaves above. When the first light touched the canopy, he stopped and bent forward, hands on knees, breathing deep and hard through his nose. The air smelled cleaner at dawn, cooler. He forced himself to inhale slowly, then again. His hands trembled, but the shaking eased.

“It’s just night,” he thought. “Just the night and the lack of sleep. You’re still here.”

A branch cracked above him.

He froze.

Another sound followed — leaves shifting, deliberate, not wind. Something heavy moved along the canopy, keeping pace. A footstep made of wood and leaf and bone.

He ran.

The sprint tore out of him like a reflex. He crashed through undergrowth, thorns ripping open his arms, vines snapping back against his face. His boots slipped in mud, found purchase, slipped again. He grunted with each breath, teeth bared, eyes wide. He leapt a fallen log, scrambled up a low rock shelf, slid down the other side on his back and kept running. Twenty minutes without stopping, without thought, without direction — just movement, just distance.

At last the jungle thickened again, closing in tight. He slowed to a crouched walk, the M60 raised, barrel sweeping left and right. His ears rang. Sweat poured off him in sheets. He stopped. Listened.

Nothing.

He took another step.

Suddenly the ground cracked and vanished beneath him.

He fell straight down, the world flipping, light replaced by shadow and wood and pain. The bamboo stakes took him hard — one through the thigh, another tearing up through his belly, a third punching into his side and bursting out his back. The impact drove the air from his lungs in a raw scream that tore out of him before he could stop it. His rifle flew from his hands and vanished into the dark.

He thrashed once, instinctively, and the movement drove him deeper onto the sharpened sticks. Pain exploded white-hot, blinding. He screamed again, longer this time, the sound breaking into hoarse fragments. His hands clawed at the pit walls, fingers slick with blood and shit-smeared wood. He tried to pull himself up. His legs wouldn't answer. His body slid back down, weight settling, the stakes grinding deeper.

"No—no—no—" he gasped, the words tearing apart in his throat.

Hours passed. Or minutes. He couldn't tell.

The pain dulled into something vast and heavy, pressing from the inside. His breaths came shallow, wet. Blood pooled beneath him. Flies found the pit. Then ants. He stopped screaming. There was no strength left for it. His eyes stared down at the bottom of the pit, framed by roots and leaves, the light fading again, the edges darkening.

Night returned quietly.

The jungle went on breathing.

By the time the last light disappeared, Cole Harlan did not move anymore.